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SUBJECT: FATAL EXPLOSION IN LATTAKIA PORT

11. (SBU) Local and international press reported widely yesterday a huge explosion in the Lattakia port that resulted in eighteen injuries, one death and the destruction of up to four grain silos as well as the system of conveyor belts that connects them. Dr. Mohammad Fadel, manager of a major grain and soybean importing company, confirmed news reports that the explosion occurred from the combustion of thick and very volatile grain dust, which he said can explode with the force of TNT. He stated that at the time of the explosion the port was busy handling a large shipment of wheat and barley, and that the old concrete silos, which lacked ventilation and were not managed by established safety standards, quickly filled with dust. Fadel continued that workmen concurrently were welding parts of the conveyor system that connects the silos, and the sparks from the welding caused the dust to explode.

13. (SBU) Other contacts state that the 25-50% decrease in capacity of the Lattakia port for grain shipments will put an increased strain on Syria's already limited port and grain storage facilities. Contacts further state that this could have a serious effect on transit shipments of commodities to Iraq, potentially causing longer delays and increased prices for freight and transportation. Fadel stated that he and other importers are beginning to shift their business to the port in Tartous, where currently there is a wait of at least ten days before ships can unload their cargo. Fadel expects the wait to increase by at least five days with the addition of the Lattakia traffic.

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